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## ABSTRACT

Twenty years after the baby boom, U.S. population is falling and school enrollment is declining. Contrary to public expectations, smaller enrollment does not mean smaller school budgets, and balancing the educational budget will require cutting programs, closing schools, and reducing teacher force. The experience of the East Meadow (New York) school district, whose residents refused both to close underfilled schools and to approve the budget needed to operate the schools, illustrates the fact that education is no longer a high national priority. Enrollment decline is creating the need for every district to develop a reduction in force policy. Eliminating programs and closing schools will require careful setting of criteria. New creative ways for dealing with enrollment decline, such as space sharing, regrouping students, early teacher retirement plans, and teacher leaves of absence, while not able to radically change the course of events, might modify their impact. The gravest danger for administrators in dealing with declining enrollment is applying a short-term solution in lieu of long-range planning. It is necessary to have a master plan that incorporates opportunities for community, faculty, and administrator input. Although there are no ways to make education again a high national priority, this report offers suggestions for preparing for and modifying the impact of its decline. (Author/JM)

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William F. Keough, a nationally recognized authority on enrollment decline, has served public education for 25 years. The last 18 years have been as a superintendent of schools in rural, urban, and suburban school districts. Keough's background also includes university teaching as well as college and private school board of trustee service.

His experiences in the area of enrollment decline date back to 1968, when he was involved with one of the first New York State school closures due to declining enrollments. From those early experiences and 10 additional years of superintendency in decreasing-size districts came an expertise in managing decline.

Keough has written numerous articles, pamphlets, and books on the topics of enrollment decline, reduction in force, negotiations for contraction, and managing decline. He has been a keynote speaker, seminar leader, and workshop developer at national conferences dealing with the issues and implications of enrollment decline.

Series Editor, Derek L. Burleson

# **Declining Enrollments: A New Dilemma for Educators**

By William F. Keough, Jr.

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### Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

**I**n communities across the country, school budgets are being defeated, board members are failing to be reelected, and school superintendents are being dismissed. The issues behind these events are suddenly becoming known through the media, educational conferences, and community forums. They are the phenomena of the 1970s: declining elementary school enrollments, half-filled elementary classrooms, program budget cutbacks, and proposed elementary school closings.

Just 20 years ago the major topics at the educational conferences reflected the problems of the 1950s—the four Bs: bonds, budgets, buses, buildings. Returning GIs had married and moved to suburbia to start families. Young communities struggled to provide the required services—and the major service was schools. This was a period of unprecedented educational growth. Thirty to 35 pupils in overcrowded classrooms, school days extended into split sessions, two or three simultaneous school building construction starts in the same district were all commonplace.

The “baby boom” years have passed. The children of the boom town suburbs and swollen urban areas have gone through the schools. What educators face today is another unprecedented period, but this time the direction is reversed: low-ratio classes with 17 to 20 pupils, a surplus of school space, and school building closings.

Declining school population is not the only effect to come from the national trend toward zero population growth. We are coming face-to-

face with the new era of no-growth. "Baby boom" growth businesses (Gerber's, Johnson & Johnson), hospitals (especially maternity wards), baby-specializing professionals (pediatricians, obstetricians), and many others in child- and youth-oriented businesses are feeling the results of the dramatic population decline. The drop in birthrates and plummeting fertility ratios will have far-reaching economic and cultural effects on American society.

A survey of Illinois schools shows that there will be a 7 to 12% state-wide enrollment decline in elementary and secondary schools by 1980. In Chicago's North Shore suburbs, Niles Township had a 50% enrollment drop in first grade. In Champaign, Illinois, four elementary schools have closed in four years. These situations are typical of what other districts face, or will face, in the near future.

As for the local tax savings resulting from declining enrollments, the sad reality is that there are few ways to hold down spiraling taxes. For most communities, the increased costs of utilities, mandated services, salaries, and school supplies and equipment alone demand increased taxation, even without new programs. Many school districts have had to cut program and staff just to hold the budget to last year's tax increase level.

The economics are disheartening and bewildering. If the cost of educating 1,000 children is \$1 million, then, when enrollment drops to 500, the district budget and school tax rate should theoretically reflect a 50% reduction. This just doesn't happen; the budget figure and tax rate stay the same, or even go up. Communities find it difficult to realize that had the enrollment stayed at the same 1,000 pupil level, the new costs would probably by now have escalated to \$1.5 million. Most districts are facing teacher salary increases of between 8% and 9% annually. Fuel cost increases alone not only eat up any savings gained through enrollment decline, but actually escalate the budget figure. That lowered enrollments mean budget decreases is a great myth. It is understood to be a myth by school administrators and board members, but not necessarily by taxpayers.

Dwindling enrollments are not limited to any specific geographic area. Suburban communities and inner-city areas alike are experiencing declining enrollments. While the causes and the feasible solutions

for dealing with enrollment decline are different in each area, the problem is very much the same: *people*. Parents worry that the neighborhood school will close because of consolidation; teachers worry about program cuts and staff reductions; superintendents worry that as enrollments decline, funds will diminish and programs may be trimmed to a point that educational quality will suffer. When parents, teachers, and superintendents worry, board members worry.

School people intuitively know that it is easier to expand programs and build schools than it is to effect budget reductions or to close schools. Building implies growth and expansion. A community's need for schools is a symbol of its youthfulness and vitality. When schools were being built and new programs added, parents were young and on the threshold of their family lives. It was an era of promise that seemed like a fulfillment of the American dream.

Budget reductions and the possible closing of a school in these same communities mark the passing of the years. Children have grown. Parents have lived through their younger years and are now approaching a calmer middle life—a fact many communities in mid-life crisis are reluctant to face.

Suburban communities share several characteristics. They are affluent havens lying on the perimeters of Metropolis, U.S.A. The rapid land value escalation of the past 25 years has produced high-priced homes that are, in today's market, financially out of reach for young couples just starting family life. These communities have little land available for new development. Most are built to capacity. Construction of middle- or lower-middle-income housing is resisted. The net result is a low-mobility, mid-life community with a low turnover of homes and few young families. Children have passed or are passing through the schools in a consistently declining enrollment pattern.

In the urban areas, "white flight" to the suburbs has left row houses built on now valuable land. These are being eaten up by bulldozers clearing the way for prime-space corporate office buildings. Block by block, largely residential city neighborhoods have been replaced by business districts. Those who have stayed on to retire have seen their children leave city homes for suburbia and a "country" way of life.

Today these remaining houses provide temporary shelter for the city's poor.

Because of the high cost of urban living, rapidly shifting populations, and neighborhood changes, the migration of middle-income young couples with children into urban areas is minimal. What remains is a highly mobile community of people of widely disparate age groups. It is a community of low or fixed incomes. Its social and educational needs cannot easily be fulfilled by the school system as presently structured.

### **The Critical Concern**

As these suburban or urban districts contract, what will be the critical concern of superintendents and boards? It will not be solely buildings or budget; those problem areas will be time-consuming and laborious, but the critical concerns will have to be people—parents, teachers, principals, and children.

Board members will face public meetings where formerly loyal supporters will raise angry fists to protest program budget cuts or the closing of a neighborhood school. Superintendents will spend long hours in contract negotiations coping with teacher organization demands for jobs, security, and reduction in force (RIF) policies. Community backlash will bring about frequent board member turnover that, in turn, may thwart continuity in planning. Scathing anti-board, anti-administration editorials in the local press will whittle away credibility. Petitions and legal action by special interest factions to keep local schools open will be costly and time consuming. Angry phone calls from constituents and pickets at the board of education meetings will all be part of the picture.

Accompanying all of the above will be the personal agonies of firing young, competent teachers to keep sometimes less able, tenured staff members because of seniority-oriented RIF policies. In addition, minority group teachers hired just a few years ago will be among the first to go. The problem list is long and it frightens even the most able school people. And for the superintendent, there is no assurance that his or her next contract option will be renewed. Many communities are answering these problems by firing the superintendent.

A public that has been led to believe that larger enrollments mean larger budgets will need to be educated to the idea that smaller enrollments will *not* mean smaller budgets. Failure to convince the public will inevitably lead to declining educational quality, loss of credibility in education, and discord in the profession. America's educators have faced and met the challenges of people concerns before—they have built our schools, integrated those schools, and guided the educational programs within them. Declining enrollment presents but one more challenge to those who lead our schools.

## Suburban School Growth and Decline: A Case Study

The post-World War II population sprawl from urban areas to first-ring suburbia in most metropolitan regions is well illustrated by examining the rapid development of Long Island in the New York City metropolitan area.

Long Island is a strip of land that stretches eastward from New York City into the Atlantic for approximately 200 miles. Its western end includes the populous New York City boroughs of Queens, Brooklyn, and the Bronx. To the east are Nassau and Suffolk Counties. The eastward population growth had its maximum impact on Nassau County in the decades between 1940 and 1960. Suffolk County felt the eastward growth in the subsequent decade. Growth is still taking place in eastern Suffolk County, although not at the rate registered in earlier years. Table 1 shows the pattern of population growth in these two counties.

TABLE 1

Long Island's Percentage of Population Growth Within  
the Total New York Metropolitan Region\*

|                | 1920-30 | 1930-40 | 1940-50 | 1950-60 | 1960-65 |
|----------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Nassau County  | 6.8%    | 11.2%   | 16.8%   | 25.3%   | 7.1%    |
| Suffolk County | 1.9%    | 3.9%    | 5.0%    | 15.8%   | 19.2%   |

\*Nassau County Planning Commission, *The Data Book* (N.Y.: Carle Place, June, 1974), p. 176.

"Moving out to our own home on the Island" was the motivation for many city dwellers in the postwar period. Veterans were returning, the wheels of industry were humming; Northern State Parkway, Southern State Parkway, and the Long Island Expressway, all stretching west to east through the island, were the yellow brick roads for the would-be suburbanites. Flushed with the pride of home ownership and charter membership in new neighborhoods, the public dedicated itself to building schools for the "baby boom" and raising taxes to run these schools. The years of expansion were difficult but rewarding. Nassau County suburbs built a reputation for quality education that attracted even more growth.

Studies indicate that Nassau County's population increased by about 55,000 per year in the 1950s. In the 1960s its population growth had slowed appreciably, registering an average increase of only 15,000 per year. A 1969 study indicated that Nassau, under existing zoning standards, could handle no more than 150,000 additional individuals. The housing start rate of 29,663 single-family residences in 1950 had dwindled to 995 in 1970. Vacant land was nearly gone.

The same report showed that the eastern end of Long Island, Suffolk County, with its existing zoning, could handle an additional 2.5 million people, more than twice its 1969 population. However, as the decade of the 1960s closed, growth on western Long Island subsided. The percentage of growth registered in Nassau County for 1960-65 dipped to below its prewar growth ratio of 11.2% for the years 1930-40.

### **Decline of Schools as a Community Priority**

The results of the population growth standstill can be observed throughout Nassau County's 56 school districts. Parents who came to the area 10 or 20 years ago have remained, while their children have graduated and left behind them a wake of empty desks, smaller classes, and half-empty schools. Ironically, the parent builders of the suburban schools of yesteryear are no longer members of the school constituency. Instead, they seek long-needed services in transportation, energy, police and fire protection, and waste-removal—to mention just a few of their new concerns. As they age, so does their community, and education tumbles further down the public priority list.

The Nassau County Planning Commission reports that the numbers of older citizens will increase markedly in the next 10 years, thus creating a stronger subpopulation with interests in public services other than schools. See Table 2.

**TABLE 2**  
**Changing Nassau Population\***

| <i>Age Group</i>  | Percent of | Percent of       |      |      |      |
|-------------------|------------|------------------|------|------|------|
|                   | Change     | Total Population |      |      |      |
|                   | 1970-85    | 1970             | 1975 | 1980 | 1985 |
| 50+               | + 34.2     | 24.1             | 28.3 | 31.3 | 31.7 |
| 0-19              | - 36.1     | 38.2             | 32.6 | 26.9 | 23.8 |
| 5-18 (school age) | - 46.0     | 21.7             | 21.0 | 19.1 | 15.6 |
| Total Population  | + .02      |                  |      |      |      |

One consequence of the changing character of the population in Nassau County has been that, as taxes rose, taxpayers defeated at an alarming and increasing rate the annual school budgets. Boards of education and administrators responded with cost-saving plans for consolidation of schools and closings of underutilized neighborhood facilities, but the "Save Our School" contingents not only voted down their plans, but sometimes voted board members out of office. This scenario is vividly illustrated in the events that transpired in the East Meadow School District.

### **Background**

East Meadow, located in the heart of Nassau County approximately 30 miles from New York City, is a community of middle-class, single-family residences.

\*Nassau County Planning Commission, *The Data Book* (N.Y.: Carle Place, June, 1974), p. 176.

Immediate post-World War II development of the Northern and Southern State Parkways opened up the central Nassau County potato fields to housing development. East Meadow and an adjacent cluster of hitherto nameless potato fields became the booming residential school districts of the 1950s. The housing construction machine had swept through central Nassau County. By 1960, the previously quiet farm community of East Meadow had more than 11,000 housing units. Development was virtually complete by 1960. In the period from 1960 to 1970, East Meadow increased its population total of 46,036 by a mere 254.

### **Enrollment**

Because of its early development, the East Meadow district reached a peak enrollment of 18,500 pupils in the 1963-64 school year. By 1970-71, students totalled 15,470 and taxes were escalating. Enrollment dropped to 12,300 by the 1974-75 school year. The tax base had not broadened and consisted mainly of homes. Eighty-nine percent of these homes were owned by tenant-taxpayers, many of whom no longer had children in the schools.

In the 1970-75 school years, the per-pupil cost rose 47%; the local school tax increased 34%; state aid to education decreased in accord with pupil loss and the artificially inflated wealth per pupil.

Homeowners were property rich and tax poor. Those who might have moved out were prevented from so doing by the poor mortgage conditions. Young families who could find and afford available housing were either having fewer children or delaying the start of their families. Enrollment of the 1974-75 school year showed 1,203 members of the senior class and 652 first-graders.

### **Public Reaction**

Like many school budgets in America, the East Meadow budget must be approved annually by the voters. If not passed the first time, the budget is reexamined by the school board and, following a series of public hearings and/or budget cuts, is resubmitted to the voters. The annual East Meadow school budget did not pass on the first try from

1972 through 1975. In 1975, the budget that was approved resulted in a year of austerity.

These budgets were not defeated because East Meadow could not afford them. The median family income in East Meadow was \$14,277 in 1970. Nassau County ranks third in the nation in median family income. Only Montgomery County, Maryland, and Fairfax County, Virginia, exceeded Nassau's \$14,632 (1970) median family income. Obviously, many factors besides family income must be considered, ranging from shifting priorities among an aging population to mistrust of local or state government, if we are to account for the public reaction to the school budgets.

### **School Officials' Response**

In 1972-73 the East Meadow school board was providing education for 13,902 students in eight elementary schools, two junior highs of grades 7 through 9, one junior-senior high school, and one high school.

By the early spring of 1973, the school board had exercised all options in its efforts to satisfy a tax-burdened community. It had been 10 years since the peak enrollment of 18,500. A difficult decision time had arrived, and the community had to face the reality of its own aging. It was no longer a young, spirited, and vibrant community born of the potato fields.

Accordingly, the school board received the recommendation of School Superintendent Martin Walsh that the Salisbury Elementary School in the northern sector of the district be closed and its students reassigned to other schools. That year the Salisbury School had an enrollment of 200 regular class students, only 25% of its capacity.

The recommendation to close Salisbury Elementary School represented the district's first attempt to economize through facility consolidation. Superintendent Walsh argued that savings would be derived from teaching, administrative, and custodial staff cutbacks, as well as from eliminated operational costs. Accompanying his recommendation for closing was the announcement that the state's Bureau of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES), an intermediate-level educational agency, would rent the facility for \$210,000 annually.

The combination of school district savings plus income from the state agency initially appealed to the school board. It announced what appeared to be a financially sound response to public demand for efficiency in the face of a drastic enrollment drop.

Shock, dismay, surprise, and anger were but a few of the emotions this recommendation triggered among the parents of the Salisbury School area. Public expressions of indignation, public hearings in crowded halls permeated with tension and pent-up frustration, and even attempts to block such a closing by court action were among the responses of the neighborhood whose school would be phased out. The superintendent watched as teachers and administrators united in opposition to his counsel against a harassed board of education. He was experiencing firsthand the hardships of the "management of decline." In June, 1973, the Salisbury Elementary School was closed by a 6-1 vote of the board of education.

As difficult as this process appeared to be in 1973, it was but a harbinger of actions to come in the spring of 1975, when the superintendent recommended the closing of a second elementary school. The following chronology briefly describes the situation in East Meadow.

### **Chronology of a School Closing**

#### *January, 1975*

Superintendent Walsh reported that the closing of one of three designated elementary schools, due to enrollment decline, would not have a deleterious effect on the district's educational program. Savings to the school district were estimated to be about \$315,000. Enrollment will drop by 536 in the district for the next year.

#### *February, 1975*

Six hundred residents appeared at the first of two public hearings to protest the school closing plan.

Traffic hazards and crowded classes are the expressed concerns.

The savings projected by the superintendent are challenged.

Teacher association and administrator association presidents denounce the plan. They project "grave consequences" if plans are

approved. In addition, their organizations feel that the superintendent's recommendations "would destroy effective education."

#### *March, 1975*

At an early March meeting the school board unofficially voted (5-2) at a closed meeting to phase out Prospect Avenue Elementary School in June and reassign its 543 pupils.

#### *March 24, 1975*

At a March 24 meeting attended by more than 600 residents, the school board voted 4-3 to close Prospect Avenue School in June and reassign its 543 pupils.

Parents now sought to prevent the closing with court action.

Chaos reached the near-violent state prior to the final vote.

Protest leaders moved to defeat the budget.

Two hundred teachers picketed the meeting.

Parents carried placards proclaiming, "SAVE OUR SCHOOLS."

#### *April, 1975*

Parents accused the school board in court of "arbitrary and capricious" action.

One hundred parents removed their children (200) from Prospect Avenue School on April 29 and staged a two-hour rally in front of the school in the morning; in the afternoon, all demonstrated in front of the superintendent's office.

#### *May, 1975*

The school board chairman who cast the deciding vote (4-3) on the closing announced his intention not to run for reelection in June.

Board members opposed to closing announced plans to call for reconsideration when the new school board convened after the June election to fill two board vacancies.

#### *June 1, 1975*

Taxpayers Interested in Education (TIE) endorsed two candidates, both committed to reopening the Prospect Avenue Elementary School.

Citizens United for Education and Taxpayers Interested in Education (CUE-TIE) endorsed two candidates opposed to reopening the Prospect Avenue School and favoring tighter money controls.

*June 4, 1975*

TIE candidates, those supporting the Prospect Avenue School reopening, were elected to the school board.

*July 2, 1975*

The newly constituted school board met and discussed reopening the Prospect Avenue School.

*August 4, 1975*

The school board voted 4-2 to rescind the Prospect Avenue Elementary School closing action of the previous school board.

By that final action to reopen a closed school, the East Meadow school district officials were frustrated in their attempts to respond to a revolt by taxpayers, 70% of whom no longer had children in the schools.

Throughout the United States, with the possible exception of certain growth areas in third- and fourth-suburban rings or in the still growing South and Southwest, the East Meadow experience and the quandary of its superintendent of schools are being duplicated. But the East Meadow story has yet another chapter, albeit an ironic one.

Following the decision to reopen the Prospect Avenue School, the newly comprised board of education proceeded to prepare a new budget that included the money needed to operate the reopened school. The budget was overwhelmingly defeated! The plurality of the defeat was similar to the plurality of the two candidates who campaigned two months earlier to reopen the school.

## **Teacher Supply and Demand**

Teaching used to be considered a sure route to job security. A teacher would always have a job. Few people believed that the need created by the ever-increasing numbers of elementary and secondary students could ever be filled. Today, meeting the teacher shortage is one goal that has been successfully accomplished.

Unfortunately, the awareness that this goal had been accomplished is only now reaching the teacher preparatory institutions. Teachers colleges are caught in the vise of changing times: declining enrollments, previous overproduction, and low turnover among teachers who have jobs have all combined to create a tight job market for teachers. Teachers colleges must learn to live with the knowledge that their recent graduates will probably find employment outside their training and chosen field.

### **Teacher-Pupil Ratios**

In observing changes in the supply and demand of teachers, it is important to note the concurrent changes in teacher-pupil ratios. There has been a drastic decline in teacher-pupil ratios since 1955. In that year, there were 30.2 pupils per teacher in public elementary schools; by 1974, this figure had declined to 22.7. Less dramatic is the decline in pupils per teacher at the secondary level—from a high of 21.7 during the years 1961-63 to 18.7 in 1974.

The teacher-pupil ratio is expected to continue downward. Much

of the reduction in the ratio can be attributed, in recent years, to the decline in student numbers and the inability of boards of education to reduce instructional staff as well.

### **Changes Ahead for Instructional Staff**

The decline in student numbers is having and will continue to have a profound impact on the staff of educational institutions well into the mid-1980s. Compared to the teaching staff of the 1960s and early 1970s, the composition of the teaching staff in the classrooms of our schools in the years ahead will show an increase in average chronological age and in years of experience. Because most salary schedules are based on years of experience and seniority, the average teacher salary will also increase. These basic changes in the composition of instructional staff are due, for the most part, to reductions in the number of openings for beginning teachers and to decreases in the numbers of young people entering the profession.

Other less obvious changes can be anticipated. With fewer people entering the profession, the introduction of new ideas, techniques, and innovative programs may decrease. This is not to suggest that more experienced teachers are not creative or effective. However, the desire or willingness to try "something new" is most frequently expressed by the young. Whether it be good or bad, there will be increased stability in curriculum and program.

In education, the upward career mobility route to principal, central office administrator, and superintendent begins in the classroom. Competent classroom teachers advanced rapidly up the corporate education ladder during years of growth. Increasing numbers of students meant an increasing number of schools with frequent openings in leadership positions. Today, with fewer students and fewer schools, the number of openings among administrative ranks has also decreased. Because of this decline, those holding administrative positions tend to stay, locking off opportunities for advancement among teacher aspirants. The result is that eager, qualified teachers seeking mobility are blocked from advancing up the career ladder.

Social behaviorists would be quick to point out that when opportunities for advancement are cut off, motivation decreases, frustration

sets in, and the individual experiences less joy and enthusiasm in his work. The oversupply of competent, well-trained classroom teachers caught in this "closed opportunity" trap will dramatically affect the climate of schools and the morale of instructional staffs.

As if lack of career advancement opportunities, decreased job satisfaction, and lowered morale were not enough for teachers to bear, as program budget cuts, economies, and reduction in force set in, they may see a competent colleague with less seniority lose a position. They may witness public meetings where angry parents, disillusioned with the quality of education their 1978 tax dollar can buy, lay the blame for education's escalating costs on the doorstep of the salary-demanding teaching organization.

### **Administrative Staff Problems**

If being a member of the instructional staff is not, in a time of institutional decline, an enviable position, being an administrator or superintendent can be even less attractive. Conflict management has become a way of life. After years of proposing solutions to society's problems, education's conspicuous failures have left the public outraged and hostile. As visible leaders, administrators provide stationary targets for public wrath.

One of the most puzzling areas of concern will be dealing with reductions in instructional and supervisory personnel. In many districts, when enrollment declines are gradual, year-to-year adjustments in instructional staff can be made through retirements, maternity leaves, or resignations. However, if severe student declines and drastic budget reductions occur with little lead time, the only recourse may be massive program and personnel reductions.

### **Implications of RIF**

#### *Legal Factors*

Because of the complicating legal factors involving state law and local district contractual constraints, each district should develop a RIF policy. Of particular import is the order of and criteria for reducing staff. Some districts will be bound by state law to reduce staff on a seniority-only basis; others may employ such additional criteria as

quality of service, experience in a specific area, district-based need, educational preparation qualifications, certification, and others.

If additional criteria are to be used, some form of evaluation measure and definition will be necessary. For example, by whom, how, and with what weight will "quality of service" be measured? Must "experience in a specific area" be in-district experience? With what level of competency? How many years ago? If certification is held in more than one area but teaching experience is in only one, would that individual have a claim equal to an individual with both certification and experience? These are difficult questions that should be addressed in RIF policy *before* reductions are made.

### *Educational Factors*

Some of the major factors complicating the issue of RIF can be collectively termed the "educational drawbacks." When the teaching force is reduced in number, class size will increase. However, conflicting research clouds the question as to whether an increase in class size automatically generates a decrease in student performance and achievement, thereby affecting educational quality. Although research answers to this issue are not clear cut, the public seems to be in no doubt. Public opinion favors small classes.

Obviously, relief from the crowded space condition of past years provides the district with an unparalleled opportunity to increase the diversity of offerings and to incorporate long-desired special curricular features previously shelved because of space limitations. Personnel cutbacks usually limit such possibilities severely—a second educational drawback.

A third educational drawback of RIF is the negative impact on overall district climate and teacher morale. Another is the possibility of having to dismiss the most recently hired: minority group members, talented beginning teachers, and part-time instructional aides or para-professionals.

Complicating the issue even further is the reality that RIF may take along with it those long fought for special program areas: elementary art, music, physical education, library-resource or media programs, elementary counseling, and other program supports. For most dis-

tricts, it has been only within the last 10 years that these areas have been added to the elementary school, usually after long, hard struggles. However, the most pervasive and destructive feature of dealing with RIF comes at another level.

When superintendents and boards of education come face-to-face with the educational effects of RIF on the one hand and the threat of a growing financial deficit on the other, decisions—if made—are wrenching. The probability that these difficult decisions will be avoided or postponed year after year is high. Herein lies the greatest drawback of all: *indecision and perennial drift*—a condition that for many seems preferable to difficult personnel and policy decision making. Once adrift with neither long-range plans nor policy, the haphazard lopping-off of staff and programs presents an even greater threat to educational quality than does RIF.

### **Programs and Facilities**

**D**uring the 1960s and into the 1970s, education has been under attack. Crisis-writing popular authors, well-respected scholars, prestigious education commissions, and the tax-paying public have launched almost yearly campaigns on the need to redesign the schools. The most consistent area of criticism has been the educational program.

There is a consensus in the literature that education has been concerned with some major goals: providing equity of opportunity; providing a bridge between the individual and society; providing for individual development.

If the 1960s were the years of runaway growth, the 1970s have been the years when growth and qualitative changes were to go hand-in-hand. For a few short years in the seventies curricular concerns did become the focus for improving the quality of education.

Federal title funds were pumped into programs. Faculty and support staff were added. Library resource and media centers were built and equipped with the newest educational technology. Compensatory programs abounded. Secondary schools expanded elective offerings, instituted "open campus" concepts, and tried to bring curricular offerings more in line with the out-of-school world of the student. We now find ourselves in the position where program improvement is, for most districts, not the crucial concern; "maintaining what we have" is the critical issue.

## Threats to Existing Efforts

School districts caught in a financial crisis have only a few possible courses of action: reduce staff and cut program, consolidate facilities, raise local taxes, or operate under deficit budgets. When deficit budgeting is illegal under state law, or tax increases are not politically feasible, the alternatives are reduced to making trade-offs between program and facilities. Given these alternatives, most administrators view facility contraction as the lesser evil. When districts do not plan ahead, however, they are forced into across-the-board cutbacks in program and personnel. And usually it is the very innovations that gave the district its reputation for quality education that are the first to go. Cost reductions that leave the district at a "bare bones" state-mandated program level are becoming more common.

Pressure from parents to keep designated schools open and cut programs is pitted against pressure from parents supportive of quality programs. Both are pitted against pressure from residents without school-age children to effect economies through any means.

Some districts such as Highline in Seattle, Washington, opted for cutting "things" first—equipment, supplies, and materials, and then school buildings and people. Ithaca, New York, decided to consolidate buildings rather than to effect massive program cutbacks. Great Neck, New York, closed schools and reduced some staff positions through consolidation, but did not cut any program areas.

Perhaps the greatest threat to school program comes not from a direct plan to cut program, but indirectly as a result of a district's thwarted effort to consolidate facilities. The district may launch a community information program and concentrate its efforts on closing underutilized facilities. The board and administrative staff's time and energy are concentrated on this alternative. Frequently, however, community opposition is strong enough to prevent the board from carrying out the plan to close schools. This stalemate, when it happens, usually occurs late in the school year and well along in the budget process. The financial crisis is imminent, the facility plan is dead, a referendum is not possible, and quick decisions must be made. Only program is left—and herein lies the real threat. Program cut decisions are

made under pressure, quickly, and usually without a well thought out plan.

Decisions to cut are made by the dollar signs, or by figuring out the area of least community resistance, or by targeting the area that is the least protected by the teachers' contract. Decisions made in this manner result in haphazard lopping off of programs, catering to someone's hidden agenda, or destruction of coordinated programs through the removal of key support personnel. Decisions made without careful evaluation and long-range planning, decisions made in the breach, and decisions made under fire present the most devastating threats to program.

When school leaders have the time to formulate a plan of program consolidation, the result is quite different. Reductions are made with the input and evaluations of many people, phased over a period of years, and planned so as not to eliminate a vital link supporting another area.

At the elementary level, program reduction plans usually affect class size, elementary specialists (art, music, physical education), and the classroom support personnel (reading, guidance, library/media). Ironically, it is these special areas that have been most recently added to the elementary school to enrich its program.

At the secondary level, the electives are usually the first to go. Low-enrollment or special interest advanced courses in foreign languages, literature, or math are also vulnerable. In some districts, total program areas are eliminated—athletics, junior high foreign language, or supportive services such as remedial reading, resource rooms, and counselors.

An additional threat to program is the elimination of coordinators or program administrators. While the program itself may remain, the removal of the coordinator can result in a program's "slow death" by neglect.

### **Program Contraction**

The question of where and how to effectuate program cutbacks gives rise to two possible approaches. There are others, but these

usually emerge first. Is it better to eliminate a program area completely and leave all other areas intact, or is it better to reduce slightly all areas, completely eliminating none?

Proponents of the first approach (complete elimination of one area) argue that keeping all other areas strong at the full service level makes better sense than weakening everything. Those supporting across-the-board reductions, but not total elimination, state that some service in all areas is better than no service in one. A specific question might be: Is it wiser to eliminate all program coordinators throughout the district or is it wiser to eliminate completely junior high foreign language? Obviously, there is no pat answer to this question that could be applied to every district. Each district will have to weigh the alternatives for its community.

An additional factor affecting decisions about program cuts is the changing value placed upon education by the public. Education was until recently among the highest of public priorities. With the changing age structure, the loss of credibility in our schools, and the ever-increasing tax impact of an inflationary economy, the value of education and its priority position in our society may give way to new priorities.

### **Facility Contraction**

Facility contraction can take the form of school closure with subsequent sale of the building, or a lease arrangement, or even a partial closure and joint occupancy. To "mothball" a facility and allow it to remain idle is the least desirable of all possibilities. Vacant buildings are open invitations to vandalism and rapid deterioration, and they usually require increased insurance protection.

The choice between selling or leasing must be made after careful consideration of future district needs. It would be disastrous to sell a building now and in five years discover it is again needed. Selling an unused building should be considered a last resort. Zoning factors may limit the market value of schools. Buildings located in residentially zoned areas are difficult to sell, whereas those in commercially zoned areas may prove to be financially attractive to buyers. Age and condition of the building also influence its potential marketability.

In urban areas, school facilities are frequently commercially zoned. Salt Lake City found itself in the unfortunate position of having to close some 20 school facilities. Fortunately, though, 13 were in commercially zoned areas of the city. Most suburban districts, however, find themselves with well-built, relatively new school buildings in residentially zoned locations. The schools and the homes were probably built simultaneously. Zoning was the last thing on most suburban educators' priority lists during the building boom.

In general, most authorities agree that lending or leasing to a community service agency is far preferable to sale. YMCA-YWCA, community youth groups, day-care centers, senior citizens organizations, or other public service agencies could serve the community as well as provide some revenue for the school district.

Establishing criteria for the decision about facility contraction varies from district to district. Many factors enter into the decision for closure: district finances, enrollment projections, and the age and condition of each facility. Deciding to close a school is only the first step; which school to close is the second. Criteria for systematically evaluating the district's school facilities and then the final determination of which building will be closed appears to revolve around efficiency factors and politics.

In a doctoral study validating a grid-type model developed by the writer and Katherine E. Eisenberger for determining the most appropriate school for closure, Leonard Bornstein found that of the 12 districts studied, nine closed schools based on efficiency criteria, while three districts made the final decision based upon political pressure. The grid suggests these basic criteria:

1. Academic excellence
2. Rate of enrollment decline
3. Socioeconomic, ethnic, racial balance
4. Safety
5. Recyclability
6. Capital outlay/operational costs
7. Education flexibility of facility
8. Transportation costs

School administrators or task force groups can use these criteria

and a weighting system for evaluating each building. The weighting system can be a numerical point (numbered percentage) or a degree type (somewhat important, important, very important). The use of a criteria/weighting system helps people make rational decisions about a highly emotional topic.

## **In Search of New Possibilities**

**T**here is not a school leader today who could not develop and implement creative uses for excess space and personnel. Reducing class size, expanding programs into larger quarters, setting up resource/remedial/recreation centers for student or community use—there exists a myriad of possibilities. Unfortunately, the limitation on implementing such worthy possibilities is not lack of expertise or creativity, but lack of finances and public support.

Given this limitation, these new possibilities must encompass a reorganizational type of thinking, possibly a reallocation of existing resources, and most probably a reordering of educational priorities. And as if these challenges were not enough, all must be accomplished within a plan that can meet both short-term and long-term needs, as well as maintaining enough flexibility to cope with "social trend" reversals should they suddenly occur—no easy feat for even the most able leaders. But, management of decline is more demanding and challenging than the management of growth.

### **New Possibilities**

Considered preferable by many to total building lend or lease arrangements is joint occupancy use. This alternative is particularly attractive in urban areas where a total building closure might have an adverse effect. Eisenberger notes:

Inner city dwellers constantly struggle against isolation and lack of community identity. Fear of violence, hesitancy to become involved with transient neighbors, and the transient quality of neighborhoods rob the city dweller of a sense of belonging. The local school is frequently the

only community unifier. Its closing spells further isolation. . . .

In today's world it is not practical to limit school buildings only to school youth . . . . Daily interaction in a joint service facility provides . . . an opportunity to change the isolating quality of education for city children by bringing them closer to the world out of school—the world in which they live.

An example of a joint occupancy facility is the John F. Kennedy School and Community Center in the Nash-Washington District of Atlanta. In this "shopping center of social services under one roof," school children share lunch lines with senior citizens and share the total facility with a day-care center, a public health office, a welfare office, a vocational training center, and other public and social service agencies.

Many other examples of space sharing with nonschool activities can be found in the literature. An Arlington, Virginia, elementary school serves 225 students, a preschool group, senior citizens, and community organizations. The Hoffman-Boston High School serves 180 junior high school students, a preschool and Montessori program, and an adult education program.

Elimination of elementary specialists and the institution of larger class sizes will ultimately mean less individual attention for children and a loss of variety in classroom approaches. It will become increasingly difficult for classroom teachers to maintain diversified programs unless some modifications are made in classroom organization.

Different grade-level organizational patterns in some districts have eased the one class/one teacher constraints on instructional flexibility. Especially for early reading instruction, regrouping children by individual learning style among and between classes or grades could help to maintain a variety of instructional approaches.

There are those who argue in support of a cross-age organizational pattern for teaching that rejects the traditional grouping by age, grade level, ability, or special need. Peter Coleman presents a model for constituting a "teachable group" based upon the "personality fit" between teacher and pupil. For 76 students ranging in grade levels from K-8, Coleman's model requires three full-time teachers and a half-time instructional aide. Through team teaching and changing group activi-

ties, he argues, a high level of individual attention can be maintained.

To cope with anticipated excess professional staff, a district might consider instituting partial retirement or Early Retirement Incentive Programs (ERIP). There are many variations of ERIP. The most common program encourages, through financial inducement, those staff members who are within five years of retirement to retire early. Most times, these experienced professionals can be guaranteed a specified, annual number of days of employment within the district as consultants, curriculum developers, master inservice teachers, or some other meaningful role. This early retirement stipend is but a fraction of the salary paid to a teacher at the top of the salary schedule.

As smaller classes move up through the grades, excess positions at the secondary level can be anticipated years in advance. Districts can encourage participation in university retraining programs that might prepare a foreign language teacher to teach English, for example. Another form of retraining might include rotation of teachers who enroll in a full-time inservice program. Or, an elementary teacher might be reassigned to the junior or senior high level and be professionally supported through teaming efforts or a modified differentiated staffing technique.

Some school systems have a program of extended leave of absence time—four to five years. The extended leave might be granted for gaining work/study experience in another career field and returning to the district as an artisan-teacher in an area such as career education, vocational education, consumer education, or mid-career adult retraining.

Use of excess staff in permanent substitute positions has long been practiced in urban areas where teacher absenteeism is high. Generally, in smaller districts this has not been feasible. If two or three small districts formed a sharing or collaborative approach, permanent substitute positions would greatly reduce the financial expense of substitute hiring and increase the quality of substitute performance.

Developing flexible scheduling practices such as multi-age groupings at the elementary level or phased one- or two-year cycle course offerings at the secondary level are additional ways of staffing.

None of the above will change the course of events, but some might modify the impact of those events.

### Pitfalls and Preventions

**T**he problem areas in the management of decline are many, the solutions few. And perhaps the gravest danger for administration is in applying a short-term solution in lieu of long-range planning. In too many districts "will of today" prevents "thoughts of tomorrow." Some administrators who have practiced the Band-Aid approach do so because the board or community sometimes insists that nothing other than a Band-Aid be applied.

Perhaps the most crucial ingredient in the prevention of "band-aidism" is lead time, not six months or a year, but two to three years. Long-range thinking and planning that incorporates community input in the decision-making process is difficult to accomplish in six months. That the district is no longer growing in student numbers and will probably decline in enrollment for the next decade should be made known to the community, as should the implications of changing student numbers. Lead time allows gradual community awareness, accurate data collection over a period of years, and an information program that can be used to gauge public sentiment as well as to provide factual data.

There appears to be consensus in the literature that coping with enrollment declines at the local district level requires a master plan. Most handbooks outline a series of steps. Frank Brunetti suggests:

1. First, establish educational goals.

2. Compare these priorities to the current state of programs, curriculum, staffing, and organization.
3. Look for enrollment trends by analyzing statistics, demographic characteristics, land-use planning in the district, and so forth.
4. From what is learned up to this point, the fourth consideration is to decide whether the school district will need more or fewer facilities and how the existing ones might best be used.
5. Then, make a plan for the development, implementation, and financing of programs, facilities, and services the district will need.
6. And last, establish a recurring systematic review of the master plan.

Reported in the National Association of Elementary School Principal's School Leadership Digest is a suggestion by Eisenberger that:

The crux of the planning effort is the school board itself. If board members and their immediate administrative personnel learn to work together smoothly and regularly, then when they are faced by a crisis, as a school closure or a reduction in force (RIF) of personnel is usually perceived to be, they will be able to bridge the problem without incidental difficulties caused by inexperience.

Eisenberger also suggests the use of simulation activities for board members and administration directed at eliminating problems that will surface as district-level consolidation efforts get "hot." Through case studies, board members have an opportunity to see what other districts have done, how the action was accomplished, and with what net effect. It is a good preparatory technique for all—the superintendent, board, and central office administrators. But once again, such activities require plenty of lead time.

District administrators and board members can find themselves the focus of a raging political debate when the community has been bypassed in the decision making, or even in the planning process. Some superintendents have taken the "we'll tell them how it's going to be" stance. It just doesn't work! Thwarted communities unleash their hostility over such actions in the form of budget defeats, board member turnover, and subsequent superintendent dismissals.

Another common tactic used to cope with contraction that frequently doesn't produce positive results is the "when faced with opposition and adversity, charge ahead anyway" theory. There is a very

fine distinction in board-community perception between a strong administrator and a dogmatic one. Unfortunately, the ability to perceive the difference appears to be learned on the job, and usually cannot be taught. Generally, it is wiser to back off, regroup, provide additional information and time, and then try again.

Underestimating middle-management anxiety is a common mistake. Principals, coordinators, and program directors will be uneasy in any district consolidation effort. Expect anxiety about job loss to run high. Often just as threatening is the possibility of being transferred to a new school. Principals may be losing all or part of a staff with whom they have developed a working rapport, a unified and supportive parent group, and a student body that is known to them. They may be gaining reams of paperwork, reshuffling of materials and equipment, an unknown student body, faculty members who are new and possibly resistant to them and to each other, and an anxious and perhaps critical parent group. Principals have much to lose and little to gain.

Every effort should be made to encourage principals to voice these concerns in superintendent/administrator meetings. Once voiced and out in the open, strategies can be jointly developed to alleviate some of the anticipated problems. Simply the realization that their thoughts are shared by all principals and understood by the superintendent will do much to lessen their anxiety.

Underestimating teacher anxiety in the transfer situation is just as common—and just as formidable a threat to smooth indistrict adjustment to change. Generally, neither principals nor teachers want to leave the comfortable and known for the unknown.

To help students, teachers, and principals adjust to a new school, the AASA Handbook, *Declining Enrollment: What To Do* suggests a visitation program.

The unknown is most threatening only when it remains unknown. The move for teachers and pupils from a comfortable, known school to one across town can be fraught with anxiety. This can be inevitable unless there have been previous experiences with this new school to help ease the move. Early in the planning stages of closing schools, teachers should be given an opportunity to visit the other schools in the district. To avoid the negative aspects of having teachers "check-out" a school

after their announced transfers, these visitation opportunities can be constructed through a professional development exchange program among the district schools.

In some districts, long-range planning allowed for massive teacher exchange programs to have been instituted long before the issue of school closings was patently evident. Teachers on the same grade level exchanged places with their counterparts in other schools for a week or more or in some other way became acquainted with other principals as well as other parent and student groups.

In this way, they became familiar with other faculties, and began to build rapport and friendships outside their own schools. These beginnings often paved the way for the unavoidable transfer two years later.

Students, also, need to have natural opportunities to visit other schools in the district long before closings are announced. Whole class exchanges and interschool projects are ways of allowing students to see and be a part of what may be in a relatively short time their new school. While these visitation programs may be costly in terms of pupil transportation and scheduling now, they will be worth their weight in positive people feelings when the closing occurs and the child describes his new school to his parents by saying, "That new school wasn't so bad. I had fun there last year when we exchanged classes."

Another potential pitfall lies in the failure to collect accurate and complete data. While this appears to be obvious, it frequently is the area of greatest controversy. The importance of accurate data cannot be too greatly stressed; one inaccurate statistic will cast doubt on all others. Just as critical is completeness of that data. Be careful not to omit information, especially when that information may present a picture not in support of the district effort. It will be uncovered and presented publicly, to the chagrin of the board and administration.

Providing an accurate and complete information program allows the district to avoid the difficulties of a defensive stance. If data collection and dissemination is not taken on by the district, critics will circulate their own "factual data," thereby undermining the administration's plans and recommendations. It becomes increasingly difficult for the administration to maintain credibility and generate confidence in such a defensive stance.

To aid in both data collection and dissemination, the use of outside resource people is helpful. Local real estate brokers, state and regional

planners, city officials, and local people with specific areas of expertise should be called upon. Their contributions should be heard.

Especially useful is a demographic analysis that should be carried out in concert with enrollment projection data. Include also the input of urban experts, sociologists, or behavioral scientists from a local or nearby university. The state commissions (highway, mass transportation, housing, etc.) should also be contacted.

Many districts have formed task forces or advisory committees to gather and review district information. Broad-based community task forces provide a direct line into the community. They serve a school system best when they are given opportunities to be involved in the decision-making process.

In the confrontation over any issue, active parents with strong points of view will surface and align themselves naturally. It is much wiser to seek them out from the beginning and help to guide their actions by providing accurate, up-to-date information, rather than to have them insisting upon a search through old board of education minutes for statistics that substantiate their own point of view and cast doubt upon seemingly arbitrary board action.

There are numerous other community involvement techniques: polls or surveys, special newsletters, visitation programs, coffee hours, PTA/superintendent meetings, and public hearings. All involve the community in a process toward decisions that will directly affect their lives and their residential areas.

Many of these suggested strategies involve the administration at the local district level; there are interdistrict and state-level possibilities that in some areas have been implemented successfully. The Educational Collaborative of Greater Boston (EDCO) is an example of an interdistrict effort. Serving 10 school districts in the Boston area, EDCO provides a facilitating service for projects in special education, voluntary integration, urban opportunities for suburban high school students (integrated with urban students), demographic analysis, and other such services that each school district may require but be unable to provide due to low incidence of need or high cost. Funds for EDCO operations are provided by local district membership contributions, grants, and federal subsidies.

Other interdistrict collaboratives such as Concord Area Special Education (CASE), and Lexington, Arlington, Burlington, and Bedford (LABB) provide special services or projects that each district alone could not afford. Interdistrict sharing of personnel, facilities, and resources has proven to benefit the students from each area.

At the state level, the Board of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES) in New York State provides much the same function as the interdistrict collaborative, but on a grander scale. Local districts pay a membership fee to a regional BOCES. In turn, BOCES provides special education services, vocational training opportunities, inservice workshops, and consultant services. In addition, BOCES makes available an instructional materials lending library. These are but a few of the BOCES services.

While interdistrict sharing efforts provide many services that would otherwise be financially prohibitive, perhaps one of the greatest advantages from such collaboratives is in the sharing of information, exchange of experiences, and provision of opportunities for joint problem solving. Through "think tanking" and "idea banks," district administrators frequently suggest possible strategies or solutions for each other. In one instance, a superintendent of schools in one district uncovered demographic trends that would mean closing a school within school bus distance of an adjoining district with overcrowding. This interdistrict sharing of problems and solutions led to legislation allowing interdistrict lease, loan, or sale of facilities.

## The Challenge of Management Decline

**E**ducation is a declining industry. There is little doubt that education is in the second of three natural phases characteristic of the organizational behavior of a social institution. Lewis Mayhew describes these phases as first, a period of dynamic growth. Social expectations rise; the institution is able to meet those expectations; there is excitement, expansion, and self-confidence. The second stage is a period of conflict. In the third period of neglect, social expectations outrun capabilities. Social expectations decline; the institution remains able to meet the reduced expectations, but there is indifference, passivity, and stagnation.

What we do today to anticipate the need for leadership style changes as education moves through phase two and into phase three will determine whether tomorrow's education will truly be in a state of stagnation. This is not to suggest that administrators and other school leaders have not planned for change. For the greater portion of their professional lives school leaders have had to plan for the changes of growth. Today's need requires a higher order of planning skill—planning for the changes of decline. The need to understand declining resource budgeting, to develop expertise in phased-scheduling techniques as one way to preserve program, and to redesign curriculum for fewer numbers of students are but a few of the skills required for decline management in education. In addition to specific techniques that can be used by building administrators, the management of de-

cline at all administrative levels requires more fully developed leadership abilities than those of growth. Decline management demands a keener sense of balance and proportion in the allocation of scarce resources, a deeper understanding of human behavior, and a greater awareness of the priorities of the future.

In growth, the passage of time tends to balance errors of judgment in resource allocation; in decline, time compounds them. Growth holds out promise of career advancement; decline portends job consolidation. Growth encourages and provides for multiple priorities; decline necessitates focus on only a few. In varied ways and for multiple reasons decline management will challenge the most able leader or administrator.

Deeply ingrained in our American way of life is the shibboleth that problems have solutions. Regardless of the degree of analytical skills brought to bear or the level of introspection applied, the reality is that not all problems have solutions. To believe and to state that there are solutions that can be implemented to turn around the decline of education as a top national priority is self-deceptive prevarication. There are, however, courses of action that can be implemented to prepare for and modify the impact of these major events. This fastback suggests some possible courses of action.

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## Fastback Titles

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